

The Changeling

BY MARIE MANNING

IT seemed to every one concerned almost perversely inconvenient that it should have happened at that particular time of the year. Summer had come six weeks before it was due and without a breath of warning. The chilly spring with its continued cold rains had not been favorable to moving the sick man, whose suffering had been prolonged by every device that wealth and science could procure. Then with the first rush of summer he had gone out like a lamp that has consumed its oil, its wick, and leaves nothing but an impalpable dust to show where the light has been.

"A poor man would 'ave 'ad an easier time dyin'—death 'as come to be erool 'ard on the rich with special doctors to keep it goin' as long as breath 'll last," the English housekeeper had remarked to the youngest and most approachable of the staff of trained nurses, who was having a sustaining cup of tea, now that "it was all over." And the girl had said nothing, only—smiling her inscrutable trained smile—that Mrs. Hatcher knew how to make a delicious cup of tea.

In the big Madison Avenue house the blinds were drawn, and there was a great deal of subdued coming and going that, one indirectly got the impression, had in its decorous muffling of speech and tread more than an undercurrent of resignation. The afternoon papers announced that Wall Street had been prepared, despite the denials of more than a passing indisposition, and that the great financier's death would create no more than a slight temporary depression in the stocks he had controlled.

It was understood that the old servants had all been provided for, and they, with an edifying blend of philosophy and humanity, could not bear the thought of the "poor gentleman suffering any more, now that it was hopeless." Under the circumstances every one was "bearing up as well as could be expected"—that is, all

but the servants' hall cook, who was getting so many orders for tea and toast, with first one and then the other "bein' took faint" or having "a gone feelin'," that her patience had worn thin beneath the strain. The servants' hall cook was not an old retainer—she had no expectations.

Mrs. Brentwing, the widow, by the advice of her physician was seeing no one. Miss Dart, her secretary and companion, was opening the notes and telegrams, and copying with the most business-like precision messages that had come with the flowers. Now and then she paused in her quick, neat handwriting to answer the telephone that hung above her desk—adjusting her voice nicely to the trend of the inquiry. In her darkened sitting-room sat Mrs. Brentwing, thankful for the decree of her doctor that left her free from intrusion at this crucial hour. Now that it was all over, she looked about her, trying to recover her hold on things. She had been his wife so long that, with his death, her identity seemed to slip from her as consciousness lapses in a physical swoon. In her place sat a woman she did not know, and this stranger who was herself had begun to drift far away from the present in the wake of earlier years. At first it frightened the old self—the one that watched and took notice. There had been no drifting in the more than twenty years of her married life; the hand that held hers was so strong and unwavering that she had never stopped to ask herself why the grasp was so firm.

She looked about the room, but the familiar objects gave no confirming sense of reality. She had never felt on terms of ease with her possessions; even here in her living-room there was no hint of herself; the Gothic furniture, episcopal in character, the hangings of church embroideries and vestments, the wooden saints in their painted shrines, had been

of her husband's choosing. At first she had secretly hated them, they seemed "queer" to her manifestly artless taste, but in time she grew to respect them as part of the splendid transformation that had overtaken her.

Her husband's personality had been like some giant machine that caught up everything within its radius and moulded it into a shape of its own devising, or, failing in that, broke it and cast it out among the shards. A man of less compelling force could never have called forth such whole-hearted devotion as Henry Brentwing had been able to draw from this fragile vessel of little depth. She had reflected from him some of his indomitable qualities, so that people spoke of her as a woman of character. But now, with the first loosening in depth of that overpowering grasp, other influences had already begun to assert themselves. All day she had sat in that darkened room, disputing their presence on the ground of loyalty to her dead, but still they came—as silently and as unobtrusively as ghosts—and demanded their reckoning. The clock struck another hour—was it eleven or twelve? She would destroy this particular fancy by giving in to it. She walked to the door, tried the lock to assure herself that she was safe even from the conscientious Dart and her ministrations of bromide or chicken broth, then unfastened a safe, and removed from a hidden compartment a manila envelope much worn and soiled about the edges.

The contents proved to be nothing more remarkable than an old-fashioned cabinet photograph of a solemn little girl of perhaps six or seven. The picture had been taken before the days of "artistic photography" or "impressions," and in its conscientious elaboration of detail not only dealt with the little girl posing bravely, but told something of the family history as well. One saw that photography, with them, was a state "not to be entered into lightly, or without due consideration." The family heirlooms had been loaned for the event, a large jet bracelet and an ostrich-feather fan held rigidly in the little hand. One could almost hear the fond parents cheering on the young martyr from behind the screen. Mrs. Brentwing hung over the

picture; her smile made the more appealing the utter desolation of her small fair face; but gradually its glow softened the haggardness, and there shone instead some of the quiet ecstacy of Raphael's *Madonna della Sedia*. It was as if she again held in her arms her child. Tears filled her eyes and fell—they were the first she had shed since her husband's death.

She was still holding her daughter's photograph when Miss Dart knocked. "I am so sorry to disturb you, but Mr. Wallbridge is here, and he seems to think it's imperative to see you." Wallbridge was the senior partner of the law firm that managed her husband's business. Mrs. Brentwing considered:—Yes, she had been thinking of him, as the man in whose discretion she might have confidence in the strange situation in which she found herself, and she told Miss Dart to admit him.

Mr. James Wallbridge, of Wallbridge, Treadwell & Wallbridge, might have been made up for the part—the trusted adviser and confidant of great men was in every line. It could not be said that he had fattened on legal complication, for there was about him none of the grosser manifestations of success. He was spare and brooding as behooved a man bearing the responsibilities of the widows and orphans of his richest contemporaries.

"Mrs. Brentwing!" He bent over her hand—but before he had concluded the words of condolence he had been at such pains to prepare, he gleaned the information that business other than that relative to her husband's death had caused her to admit him. He extracted it from the air, from her look and manner; and finally his perfectly schooled eye, travelling imperceptibly, grasped the whole story in the child's photograph resting against the frame, on her desk, that held her husband's picture.

She motioned him to a chair and completed rather a slow turn about the room; he knew she was making up her mind whether to crowd the family skeleton back into its closet, or to open the window and give it the daylight.

"You have come to offer me the help that only so good a friend of my husband's can give; but if I asked you to help me in another way—would it seem

strange that at such a time I can have any other thoughts but of my husband?"

He gave her to understand that his attitude was entirely sympathetic, and she continued in a low voice: "Perhaps you are not aware that before my marriage to Mr. Brentwing I had been married—that I have"—her voice failed and the slow color mounted her cheeks—"that I had a daughter, of whom I have lost all trace?"

The inclination of his head might have indicated that he was already aware of the fact, or that she had his deepest sympathy in such a calamity. To observe his crucial interest in her story one would never have supposed that he was familiar with every detail, that he had, in fact, drawn a will contingent upon her reunion with this daughter.

She sat before him with her hands clasped, her eyes fixed on his in an intensity of appeal. "If you would only help me to find her! I seem to have been in a dream for years; I wanted to make her loss public, but something held me back. There were circumstances, when I first parted with her, that made a temporary separation advisable, and then we lost all trace. I wanted to go to any length in my efforts to find her, but my husband thought it would be better—better for her sake, too—to avoid the publicity that such a step would entail."

She brushed her hand across her forehead, as if trying to clear her thoughts. "I cannot tell you when the idea took possession of me, as it did eventually, that Laura was dead. Perhaps it was that my husband was so tender with me when he spoke of her—without putting it definitely into words, or words that I can recall—he made me feel that he would gladly give up everything if he could only give Laura back to me. And I never had the courage to ask for the worst." She paused, and he waited in genuine concern for her to regain sufficient control of her voice to continue. "Can you understand—? It seems such wretched folly now, but while there was an atom of hope to cling to I couldn't bear to kill it with the truth. But since my husband's death—I can't explain it any more than I could my first obsession—I feel that Laura is living. To-day, when I sat here and wanted to be with him—

nothing but that—the thought of my child intruded—intruded until I almost hated her. But it persisted; it was like some one that had been buried alive calling to get out. When I took out Laura's picture I felt that there was not an hour to lose—that I must know the truth."

She paused, flushing with the fervor of her utterance, and Wallbridge was conscious of some of the transmitted force of her emotion. He had always regarded her as an apt parrot, reproducing the speech and manner of those in whose environment it had pleased her husband to hang her cage. But there seemed to be real woman in her, after all. This eleventh-hour insight caused an involuntary readjustment of his whole view of the situation, and decided him without further delay to put her latent maternal eagerness to the test.

"You know perhaps," he went on, slowly choosing his words, "that a public acknowledgment of your relationship to your daughter, in the event of finding her, would make a difference in the conditions of your husband's will."

Whatever shock his words brought, she gave no outward sign, and the lawyer continued: "You will in any case inherit a third of Mr. Brentwing's fortune; it was his wish, however, that things should remain as they are—" the pause was pregnant with meaning. "There might be a good deal to urge on the other side—the ineffectualness of your sacrifice, the probability that you and your daughter would have grown too far apart in the long interval to be reunited even if you should meet."

Her quickened perception had already filled the pause in his speech. He knew something of her daughter—he had some thread of which she had no knowledge. To acquire this information from him she felt would be as complicated as the bargaining in an Eastern bazar—information which his pure love of the game of evading fact by a deliberate obliqueness of speech would make him sell dearly. The prospect drove her to open revolt; she was like a woman pressing a starved face against the window of a banquetting-hall.

"Mr. Wallbridge"—he had almost a feeling of indelicacy in witnessing such painful eagerness as her face now showed

—"I beg that you will tell me anything you know of my daughter—quickly!" She had drawn to the edge of her chair, and he had an alarming premonition that in another moment her emotion would precipitate him into the headlong rush of a "scene." It was this fear that surprised from him the statement he had not intended to make at this time:

"Your daughter is here in New York!"

"Then why do we waste time—bring her to me."

He did not have an opportunity to answer; they had both become conscious of something transpiring in the hall. The stealthy footsteps of those who do their honest work like thieves in the night—they were making their way down the hall from her husband's bedroom, and walked softly past her door and whispered, before resuming the labored step of those who carry a dead weight. Then the library door at the end of the passage closed. Mrs. Brentwing buried her face; it was as if she had again felt that unwavering grasp in which she had so long been passively content.

"Not until—until it is over," she said, and signified that she wished to be alone.

When New York recovered its breath after the announcement of Henry Brentwing's marriage, some twenty years before, it was understood that his wife had been a widow from one of the smaller towns—Troy or Utica—and that she was socially as obscure as she was actually lovely. The outer darkness in which she had dwelt, prior to her discovery by Brentwing, proved to be her social salvation. People with cousins in Troy or Utica, or wherever it was she had come from, had never heard of the unknown beauty. Her history, family, antecedents, were as much of a mystery as if the eccentric millionaire had married a Polynesian belle with a pretty taste in nose-rings. Her method, nevertheless, of obtaining a passport to that set whose recognition she coveted was so brilliantly negative as to amount to positive genius; the first society heard of her was the news of her safe and unostentatious arrival.

Her husband, though a member of a good old New York family, had never even taken a passing interest in the

arduous frivolity to which his wife was so strongly attracted. Wall Street had filled his life to overflowing till he had met Mrs. Howe, and she had given him a strange reviving sense of being human, after all. He had from the beginning an amused confidence in her ability to justify herself with the particular coterie on which she had set her heart, despite her lack of social background and what are loosely known as "advantages." That she fulfilled his expectations was quite in line with her peculiar talent, as it were, of standing beautiful and patient and of allowing the thing she coveted to come to her. It was this pathetic lack of aggressiveness that had at first attracted Brentwing.

Exemplary as her methods had been, a faint undercurrent of detraction had begun to hum, but not before her position was too securely established to be disturbed by mere innuendo. It was whispered that her first husband had been a bookkeeper, whom she had divorced in one of the Western States. The fact that he had been given the custody of the child was the equivalent, so these gossips said, to a sentence of guilt. Unfortunately none of these rumors could be confirmed, owing to that screening obscurity before referred to, on the part of Mrs. Brentwing's antecedents.

Wallbridge had always felt before to-day that it was not Alice Brentwing's way to suffer; that life to her had been a steady marshalling of those forces that make for success. Her perfectly balanced nerves, reflected in her clear complexion and youthful figure, had never known the wear of an hour's worry. The eternal vigilance necessary to this all-important beauty had converted her into a Stoic philosopher without having a conscious acquaintance with the first principles of the school. Of late years Wallbridge had been humorously inclined to regard Mrs. Brentwing's perfections—no separate one of which revealed the touch of time—as he regarded those perfectly bottled fruits that are the pride of caterers' displays—she was without spot or blemish, yet not fresh.

Brentwing's position in the world of finance had been such as to incite the daily press to write of his funeral as "obsequies." It brought back to town,

though New York languished in sweltering humidity, every one who had a proper pride in being any one. The honorary pallbearers were drawn from that imposing group that, in default of anything more sensational, the Sunday papers publish from time to time under the heading, "America's Kings of Finance." And such operative talent as the country still afforded rendered a soul-stirring "De Profundis." She went through it all in the sooty, choking *crêpe* they had provided for her, her consciousness taking little note of the service; within was a gaping chasm; without, some spectacular drama in which every one but herself seemed to be taking part. Gradually her vision cleared—she had tried to give the dead man only loyal thoughts, to keep faith with him in the face of almost damning evidence. For if Wallbridge knew of Laura's presence in New York, then Brentwing must have known too—and why had he deceived her? A stupor began to creep over her, but she refused the faithful Dart's smelling-salts—it was too blessed not to feel the full force of her own bitter questioning.

Wallbridge held himself in readiness for Mrs. Brentwing's decision when it would be "all over." He had assisted her from the carriage that had drawn up in front of the Madison Avenue house when she had intimated, by a detaining pressure on his arm, that the crucial interview would not longer be delayed. The blinds of the late house of mourning were already raised, and within there was a conspicuous absence of flowers and of other evidences of a desperate resolve toward cheer that kindly disposed friends had undertaken to create. She led the way immediately to her study, where their last talk had been; again his perfectly schooled eye, travelling imperceptibly, saw that she had removed her child's photograph, and that the picture of her husband once more occupied its customary place.

"You must be very tired, dear Mrs. Brentwing; wouldn't it be better to see me to-morrow—or even when you are quite rested?"

Her answer was to motion him to be seated. "The business connected with my husband's property can wait, certainly—but I must ask you to put in my hands

immediately the means of communication with my daughter."

He consulted his watch. "I'm afraid it's too late to-day, but you could arrange to meet her to-morrow morning. Miss Howe has a successful stenographic bureau in one of the down-town office buildings; she employs several young women, and has, I believe, a very prosperous concern."

"And is this known generally—that my daughter works here, in the same town with me?"

He saw her steady herself against the shock of impending revelation. "To the best of my knowledge," he said, "no one knows now but myself."

She drew her breath quickly before the next question. "Then my husband knew?"

"Yes—he knew." The lawyer answered, feeling that any attempt to justify his friend's course could only slightly lessen a wrong that still, in its utter cruelty, might appear to mask some purpose favorable to herself.

"Will you give me her address now, please? I am, as you see, a little tired." Silence, patience, pliancy, had so long been the weapons with which she had forged the armor of her life that speech was as foreign to her now as in the days when Brentwing had confused these qualities with meekness. She had no intention of confiding in Wallbridge her opinion of her late husband's course in the matter of this separation, but the ruin that the knowledge of it made of her delicate fair face shocked him more than a "scene" would have done.

Next morning she was on her way down-town before her servants, the faithful Dart, or the nurse that the doctor had insisted on retaining in the house in case her grief should bring about a bad turn, knew that she was awake. It was the employees' hour on the Elevated, and she found herself crushed in a throng of pallid-faced girls, men nervously alert, and others who looked weeks in arrears with sleep. Her heavy widow's veil screened her face from recognition, but in that crowd there was no one likely to know her. It had been a long time since she had rubbed elbows so closely with humanity. Wealth, that had given luxury, had also furnished seclusion;

when she had travelled with Brentwing, each detail of the journey was carefully weighed and considered—the whole resolving itself into a sort of ceremonial of exclusion.

But now, as she stood for a moment outside the office building, whose gigantic height suggested the soaring flight of a monumental shaft, she was reminded of the days when she used to bring little Laura to the office where Howe had been employed, wait for him to finish his accounts, and wheel the baby-carriage past the big furniture shop on the main street, and wonder if they dared risk taking the grained-oak table for the parlor—on the instalment plan.

She looked for her daughter's name on the black and white wall directory between the revolving doors and the first group of elevators—the sight of it made a pulse in her bosom rise chokingly and sent her stumbling toward the first descending car that, with its mate, was plying its way up and down like the weights of a gigantic scale. The car stopped abruptly at the floor she had asked for; confusedly she wandered about the maze of bare, clean corridors—half expecting to see the little girl from whom she had parted twenty years before come from one of the closed doors. Her daughter's name again, this time in business-like gilt letters on an opaque glass door, pulled her together with the shock of a cold shower—and she opened the door of a room where a half-dozen girls were clattering at as many typewriters. The one nearest the door said, in answer to her question, that she would see if Miss Howe were disengaged, and without inquiring the visitor's name went to an inner office. A moment later the messenger standing on the threshold of this sanctum nodded; time was evidently too precious to be wasted in formalities, and Mrs. Brentwing walked toward the door.

When the young woman writing at the flat-top desk raised her head, her mother had the feeling that she was again confronted by her sister-in-law—the one who had never liked her and prophesied that she would not make Samuel Howe a good wife. The likeness was startling—the same squareness of brow, the straightness of glance, the same uncompromising goodness that must have its funeral pyre,

in the market-place if need be, or in the home circle if times have grown tolerant.

Miss Howe waited for the lady in mourning to state her errand, but there was something in that overrighteous young glance that made it more difficult than the older woman could have supposed.

"I am—I am—" She put back her veil; the casual glance of the younger woman intensified, her features paling and sharpening as the fragile prettiness of the other fastened itself on her consciousness.

"I know—you are Mrs. Brentwing."

Her visitor unconsciously put up her hand in protest. "I am your mother."

The girl at the desk stirred restlessly, and it took a moment or two for her to put the words together. "I've grown so accustomed to thinking of myself as having no mother—that the reality confuses me. During my father's lifetime he was all in all to me—and now I am absorbed by other things."

Mrs. Brentwing made no reply immediately; it seemed that she would have to make out a very good case for herself to secure justification at the hands of her daughter. What was her case? She had never felt the necessity of formulating one before.

"I came here, Laura, thinking that for the rest of my life we'd be together—but you don't seem glad to see me."

In her uneasiness the girl used the one word that she had meant to avoid. "You made your choice long ago, mother; however hard it was for my father and me, we accommodated ourselves to it. And now that I have made my place in life, it doesn't seem fair to ask me to give it up because something has happened to make you change your mind."

"But what am I asking you to give up—?"

"Oh, if it's only a friendly call?" The girl smiled; she had beautiful teeth, and her mother saw for the first time how handsome she was in a boyish sort of way.

"Does this sort of life mean so much to you?" Her mother glanced around the well-furnished office, listened again to the clattering babel of typewriters in the room beyond; twenty-four hours of it, she felt, would have driven her mad. And here was this girl, her daughter, preferring it to luxury.

"Oh, I'm over the first fine edge of my enthusiasm; I don't come back evenings and work for pure love of it, but I enjoy it thoroughly. My one regret is that my father did not live to see the success I'm making of it; he went without so much to keep me at school and get things started that it seems cruel to think he did not live to enjoy it."

"You loved him dearly, then—?"

"Who could help loving him dearly?" Then she broke off abashed—it was as if she had said a tactless thing to a stranger. The dull red came into Mrs. Brentwing's cheek and burned there.

"Can't you see, child, that what I did was as much for your sake as my own? I could not foresee this long separation. I gave you up with the idea that when you came back to me you were to have everything that makes life worth living. You were so pretty, Laura, so sweet—that it seemed cruel you had to grow up the way I did, without advantages, with nothing but the cruel sordid things of life ahead of you."

The girl had a pencil in her hand and unconsciously she made characters on the back of a note-book while she talked—characters that stood for the *pro* and *con* of the case. She had become very grave; she wanted to be just, absolutely just—even to Mrs. Brentwing. She would not allow herself to think of her as mother.

"But surely I could have had the advantages my father gave me if you had stayed—?"

"Advantages!" The older woman could not keep the scorn out of her voice. "It was to shield you from such advantages—drudgery—the rough contact with life—that I took things into my own hands. That I failed utterly to protect you from them was through no fault of my own."

"To me there are things worse than what you call 'drudgery and the rough contact with life.'" As she said this Laura was all Howe—principles and prejudices—the Howe traits incarnate.

The two women sat looking at each other in silence, each presenting to each the impenetrable riddle of personality. When the mother spoke again it was to urge upon her daughter those things that her own heart had yearned for in the lean years of her youth and ungrati-

fied ambition. "Dear child, you are thrusting aside life without knowing what it means. Don't apply to me all the petty standards you've ever heard of without knowing me—come and let's travel wherever you wish, and get acquainted. Laura, you are a beauty in your puritanical way, and it will be better than being young again to see you have your chance. We'll go to Europe and let the world get used to thinking of us as mother and daughter while we are away; you'd love it, dear—I know you would."

But the girl only shook her head. The prospect of the kingdoms of the earth, from the high mountain, did not tempt her. The older woman was beginning to lose her ground, it was so cruelly different from what she had expected; she attributed Laura's attitude to the influence of the girl's father and his sisters. Experience counselled discretion, but old aversions to the family her daughter so strongly resembled burst forth like a long-smothered flame, and when the flame was checked the havoc had been wrought.

"It is apparent you have drawn your conclusions of me from the teaching of your father and his family—"

The girl at the desk did not wait for her to finish. "I drew my conclusions of you from what they did not say. Let us understand each other once and for all, since it would only be painful to repeat the experiment of this interview. My reverence for my father's memory makes it impossible for me to assume a semblance of friendship toward the woman who spoiled his life. He never spoke of you but once, and then it was to regret that he was unable to provide those luxuries that he seemed to feel were your due. How did I know you to-day? From the picture of you that always stood on the mantel, and that he used to give me to kiss before I went to bed as a child. And you want me to come and share Brentwing's money, be known as his stepdaughter—that would be a strange experience for my father's only child!"

The mother got slowly to her feet. "I did not understand that you felt like this or I would not have come—you will kiss me, won't you, for good-by?"

Laura Howe hesitated.

"If your father gave you my picture to kiss, surely he wouldn't want you to

refuse me now." Sure as Laura had been of the rightness of her principle and its practice, the hungry embrace of her mother unnerved her and filled her with a sort of unwilling compassion for the woman who clung to her with such tragic desperation. Perhaps there would have been a different conclusion to things had not their embrace been rudely startled by a peremptory knock at the door, and the girl who had announced Laura's mother again stood on the threshold.

"Excuse me, Miss Howe, but Wallbridge, Treadwell & Wallbridge want some rush work in connection with the Brentwing estate—want it by noon, and must have an answer immediately."

The name Brentwing came as a shock to the quickened sensibilities of both women—to Laura it was the name of an enemy, the destroyer of her father's

home; the sound of it added fuel to the flame of her resentment. To the widow it was the light at the end of the long dark passage—that made endurable the failure of her motherhood. He had not hesitated to risk her severest judgment to save her from this cruelest of experiences: to him, the child that was dead in feeling was dead in fact. It was the benefit of the doubt to the dead man—or nothing!

Laura's voice, vibrant with the right as the Howes would have sensed it, rang out above the clatter of the typewriters to the girl awaiting her answer: "No, we haven't time for any Brentwing matter."

At the words her mother slipped through the door without a single backward glance, hugging to her famished heart the merciful delusion that her husband had deceived her only to be kind.